

## Gavin D’Costa, Vatican II, and Islam<sup>1</sup>

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BY THE END of Gavin D’Costa’s *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*, readers will come to appreciate the particular challenges that the study of Islam poses to Catholic theologians. The study of Islam calls for a certain familiarity with the Qur’an and with the Islamic religious sciences. It also calls for the careful consideration of magisterial teaching on non-Christian religions and Islam in particular. The Church, however, has said very little about Islam (especially in comparison to Judaism), and so, theologians proceeding with a study of Islam find themselves without many signposts along the way.

The study of Islam is also challenging because of the ways in which Christians and Muslims disagree on central religious questions. This point is often neglected or ignored altogether, and I would like to address it in some detail here. It is true, of course, that many things are common in Christian and Islamic teaching, beginning with the doctrine of God. Muslims believe with Christians in one God, the creator, who is at once merciful and just. *Lumen Gentium* §16 explains that Muslims, “along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind” (an explanation to which Pope Francis alluded in his address before leaders of world religions on March 20, 2013, soon after his election to the papacy). This statement (perhaps modeled after Paul VI’s August 1964 encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*) stops short of a simple declaration that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Nevertheless, the Church chose here to emphasize what is common in the Christian and Islamic doctrines of

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God, and not what is distinctive to Christianity or to Islam.

Islam also recognizes many biblical figures as prophets or, in the case of women (according to Islam only men are prophets), as holy figures blessed by God. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Moses, David, Solomon, John [the Baptist], Jesus, and Mary are all protagonists in the Qur'an. In a sense, however, this is where the problems begin, as the Qur'an does not simply follow the Bible in its presentation of these characters. It presents them in a way meant to advance the effectiveness of Muhammad's own preaching. To this end, the Qur'an turns many biblical figures who play distinctive roles in the grand salvation history of the Bible, which begins with Adam and ends with Jesus, into prophets who admonish their people to obey them and to worship God alone under the threat of divine punishment. According to the standard Qur'anic prophetic scenario (or "punishment story," as Western scholars of the Qur'an have dubbed them), a prophet is sent by God to his people, the people rejects the prophet and God, and God destroys the people. The various retellings of this scenario (involving Noah, Lot, Moses, and a number of Arabian prophets unknown to the Bible) are all meant as lessons to Muhammad's own people. The Qur'an intends for its audience, having heard of the demise of earlier peoples who rejected earlier prophets, to accept Muhammad, the prophet who has been sent to them.

While the Qur'an does not completely erase the distinctive characteristics of biblical protagonists (Adam is still expelled from a garden, Noah still builds an ark, and Moses still confronts Pharaoh), it does seem to have what one French Catholic scholar (Claude Gilliot) has called a "monoprophetism": one has the impression that the same prophet appears under different names. All of the prophets teach the same basic message. Muslims would add that God has sent a prophet to each people (Qur'an 10:47; 16:36) but that the last of these prophets is Muhammad, the only prophet whom God has sent to the entire world. Muhammad's scripture, the Qur'an, abrogated all earlier scriptures, and his law, or *shari'a*, replaced all earlier laws. God's will is for all humanity to follow that law until the Day of Resurrection.

It is perhaps important to add that the role of a prophet is not so much to bring mysterious or inscrutable teachings (although there is some of this) as it is to remind humans of their religious instinct: Islam is the natural religion inherent in human beings. A well-known tradition attributed to Muhammad has him relate that "everyone who is born is born with a sound nature (*'ala fitra*); it is his parents who

make him a Jew or a Christian or a Zoroastrian.”<sup>2</sup> According to the standard interpretation, this “sound nature” is Islam. The role of the prophet, therefore, is principally to remind people of their religion, the true religion that has been sown into the fabric of their being. All other religions are man-made perversions of this true religion.

In light of all of this, it is perhaps not a surprise that Muslims deny that the Bible is a valid scripture (even if individual Muslims of different eras have turned to the Bible in their efforts to better understand the Qur'an or the stories of the prophets). According to the standard Islamic perspective God sent down heavenly books to certain prophets before Muhammad, notably Moses, David, and Jesus (sometimes Abraham is added to this list), but these books were changed or falsified by Jews and Christians. Through this process of falsification (*tahrif*), new scriptures were eventually written and collected together to form the Bible as Jews and Christians know it. At the same time Muslims generally hold, in light of certain Qur'anic verses (notably 7:157), that the Bible nevertheless contains references to the coming of Muhammad as a new prophet. Hence it is common to find Muslim jurists who declare that the Bible should not be read for religious guidance, but can be used for the sake of Islamic apologetics (*da'wa*).

Thus, figures such as Abraham, Moses, or Jesus are common to Islam and Christianity only inasmuch as the biblical and Qur'anic presentations of them happen to coincide. As we have seen, however, they do not always do so. Indeed, in some cases, the presentations of such figures are so dissimilar that it is reasonable to ask whether we are dealing with different characters who simply happen to share the same names.

This question is particularly important—as regards Muslim-Christian dialogue—when it comes to Jesus. The Qur'an denies that Jesus is the son of God (9:30) and calls Christians unbelievers for stating that “God is Jesus” (5:17; 5:72). In two cases (5:72 and 5:117) the Qur'an has Jesus himself reprimand Christians who consider anyone but Allah to be God. The Qur'an, at least according to the standard Islamic reading of it, denies the death of Jesus (4:157): Islamic tradition holds that God transformed another man into his likeness and that this man was crucified in his place. Obviously, then, there is no place for the salvific or redemptive value of Jesus's death. Indeed, the

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<sup>2</sup> See *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh, SA: Darussalam, 1997), 6:259 (no. 4775).

Qur'an's frequent refrain that "no bearer shall bear another's burden" (6:164; cf. 2:286; 4:111; 17:13–15; 29:12, among others) may be a rejoinder against the Christian doctrine of redemption.

It is true that the Qur'an calls Jesus "Christ," but it does not seem to give any meaning to this term. "Christ" in the Qur'an is simply another name given to Jesus (something that presumably reflects the late antique Christian use of this term as a second name for Jesus). The Qur'an also describes Jesus's birth through the spirit of God which he breathed into Mary (21:91; 66:12) and names him the spirit (4:171) and word (3:45; 4:171) of God. However, this suggestive Christological language does not seem to have implications for the presentation of Christ elsewhere in the text, and in any case, it is qualified by Islamic traditions, which makes "spirit" and "word" into simple titles for Christ that in no way suggest divinity. Something similar can be said about the miracles that the Qur'an attributes to Jesus: he brings a clay bird to life by breathing in it (as God brings Adam to life from clay; 3:49; 5:110), heals the blind and the leprous (3:49; 5:110), speaks as a child (3:46; 19:24–33), and brings the dead to life (3:49; 5:110). However, the Qur'an often (although not always) adds that Jesus accomplished these miracles only with the permission of Allah, and Islamic tradition is quick to add that these miracles were simply signs given to a prophet, like the signs given to other prophets. Indeed, an entire genre of Islamic literature (*dala'il al-nubuwwa*) is dedicated to the argument that Muhammad himself produced greater signs than those given to Jesus or any other prophet. Finally, the Qur'an has Jesus predict the coming of Muhammad (61:6; although here he is given the name "Aḥmad").

The Jesus of Islam, then, is not only different from the Jesus of Christian faith; in some ways, he is an anti-Christian figure. This anti-Christian quality of the Muslim Jesus becomes explicit in Islamic eschatological traditions in which Jesus breaks crosses and kills pigs upon his return in the end times.

In light of Islam's controversial teaching on Christ, it is no surprise that Christian theologians (beginning, perhaps, with John of Damascus) long approached Islam under the category of heresy. In recent times, however, Catholic theologians have sought to categorize Islam in less abrasive terms, and much of D'Costa's attention in *Vatican II* is dedicated to a consideration of their efforts. He rightly emphasizes the importance in this regard of Louis Massignon, a French Catholic scholar of Islamic mysticism (and, towards the end of his life, a Melkite priest). In his work *Les trois prières d'Abraham* (and elsewhere),

Massignon envisages a mystical connection of Muslims with the Abrahamic covenant. The ideas of Massignon, who died soon after the opening of Vatican II in 1962, are often thought to have inspired the irenic statements of the Council on Islam.

D'Costa, however, argues that the influence of Massignon's ideas on Vatican II has been exaggerated. To this end, he notes that the first draft of *Lumen Gentium* §16, in reference to Muslims, states that "the sons of Ishmael, who recognize Abraham as their father and believe in the God of Abraham, *are not unconnected with the revelation made to the patriarchs.*" This reference, however, was deleted and replaced with the simple observation that Muslims "[profess] to hold the faith of Abraham." The Church's decision in this regard, incidentally, suggests that Catholics should not hastily embrace the category of "Abrahamic religions," a category now widely used in inter-religious dialogue (although not without critique: see Aaron Hughes' *Abrahamic Religions* and Jon Levenson's *Inheriting Abraham*).

Nevertheless, at Vatican II, the Church sought to highlight positive aspects of the theological relationship between Islam and Christianity. *Lumen Gentium* §16, as quoted above, emphasizes what is common in the Muslim and Christian doctrine of God. *Nostra Aetate* §3 declares that the "Church is filled with esteem for Muslims" and notes a number of doctrines that Muslims share with Christians, including: reverence for Jesus and Mary, acknowledgement of Mary's virginity, belief in the day of judgment, and the worship of God through "prayer, almsgiving, and fasting." It also enjoins Christians and Muslims to forget past hostilities and "to work honestly for mutual understanding." In one place (§3 again), *Nostra Aetate* employs a Qur'anic turn of phrase, relating that Muslims "adore the One God who lives [and] exists in Himself." This seems to be a paraphrase of Qur'an 2:255(a), the famous "throne verse" that is so important to Muslim piety (and may be connected to Daniel 6:27). In any case, D'Costa is certainly right when he concludes (180, and again 202–04) that the use of Qur'anic language does not imply an endorsement of the Qur'an. This language reflects the concern of the Council fathers to articulate Islamic teaching in an accurate manner, and nothing more.

Moreover, while *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* express appreciation for the faith of Muslims, they do not make any definitive statement regarding the place (if any) of Islam within divine revelation. Indeed, they say nothing at all about the Qur'an or Muhammad. The Council's silence on this count is consistent with the teaching

that Christ is the definitive revelation, a teaching expressed clearly in *Dei Verbum* §4: “The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This statement seems to leave no space for a Catholic theologian to argue that the Qur’ān, which both comes after the “Christian dispensation” and contradicts it, is a revealed scripture. Perhaps this is why some scholars, as D’Costa notes (168n32), simply ignore *Dei Verbum* §4 in their studies of Vatican II and Islam, or why other scholars look for creative ways to affirm that the Qur’ān is revealed or inspired in some way. Among these is the Franciscan Giulio Basetti-Sani, who argues in his 1977 work *The Koran in the Light of Christ* that the Qur’ān actually affirms Christian teaching, albeit in a veiled or hidden manner (much as the Old Testament contains hidden references to Christ). Anything that contradicts Christian teaching in the Qur’an, Basetti-Sani argues, is in fact a refutation of *heretical* Christian teaching. Perhaps, Basetti-Sani suggests, Muhammad himself was never fully aware of the inner Christian meaning of his proclamations and the Church can now help Muslims discover this meaning.

Others imagine that Islam could be thought of in so called “paracletic” time (the time of the Spirit); that is, even if Muhammad came after Jesus chronologically, he could still be thought of under the category of *praeparatio evangelica*, as someone like the prophets of the Old Testament who predicted the coming of Christ. This notion of “paracletic time” has been strongly (and convincingly) criticized by the Egyptian Dominican Georges Anawati, a disciple of Louis Massignon and one of the Catholic experts on Islam at the Council. Anawati comments: “The overlapping of two times, and of Muhammad anterior ‘paraclectically’ to Christ, is a play on the imagination rather than a statement emanating from a firm grasp on reality.”<sup>3</sup>

Like Anawati, D’Costa is wary of the contrived nature of Catholic arguments for the revealed nature of the Qur’an (in this regard, he also considers the thought of the French White Father Robert Caspar, another disciple of Massignon and expert at the Council) and of their fidelity to the teaching of Vatican II. The problematic nature of such arguments, D’Costa adds, is now clearer still in light

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<sup>3</sup> G. Anawati, “An Assessment of the Christian-Islamic Dialogue,” in *The Vatican, Islam and the Middle East* Kalil, ed. C. Ellis (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 52–68, at 58.

of the 2000 Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, which explains: “The theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to that found in other religions, is contrary to the Church’s faith” (§6).

D’Costa convincingly concludes that theologians attentive to Church teaching cannot think of Islam as a revealed religion (*Vatican II*, 184). What is left, he implies, is to think of Islam passing down truths received from Christian revelation. Inasmuch as the Qur’an recounts biblical narratives and teaches certain things (such as the Virgin Birth of Christ and, perhaps, the Immaculate Conception of Mary) that align with the Bible or Christian tradition, one might conclude that Muhammad learned of these things from Christians and, impressed by them, faithfully passed them on in the Qur’an. While the Council fathers never explicitly articulate this idea, which D’Costa labels historical “dependency,” one could argue that it is implied by both *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* (D’Costa does as much on 181).

The idea of Islam’s dependency is intertwined in D’Costa’s consideration of a second idea: Muslims (like other non-Christians) could be saved because they are “invincibly ignorant” of the Gospel. The idea of invincible ignorance is developed already by Aquinas (although it first appears in a magisterial teaching in Pope Pius IX’s 1854 encyclical *Singulari Quadam*) and was applied to the case of Muslims by Juan de Lugo († 1660). De Lugo proposed that Muslims’ ignorance of the Gospel, together with their knowledge of true revelation that passed into the Qur’an from Christian tradition, might mean that they can still be saved by a supernatural faith. In other words, Muslims might be free of the charge of rejecting the Gospel (which they have not truly known) yet still be held to have a sort of salvific faith because of the remnants of Christian truth in the Qur’an. D’Costa suggests that De Lugo’s ideas (much more than those of Massignon) come closest to the teaching of the Vatican II on Muslims: “In other words, the Council may simply be recovering a pre-modern theological tradition on Islam” (182–83).

As D’Costa explains, the idea of Islam’s dependency on Christian revelation was precisely what once led Christians to categorize Muslims as heretics and schismatics. With de Lugo, however (and perhaps in the documents of Vatican II), it is used to locate Muslims within the context of authentic divine revelation: “This very source of condemnation now becomes a positive source of affirmation” (183).

Now, it should be pointed out that this idea would be completely unacceptable to Muslims, since a shibboleth of Islamic orthodoxy is the recognition that everything in the Qur'an comes only from God. This does not mean, however, that the idea of dependency could not be, or should not be, taught by the Church. There are many things that Islam teaches about Christianity that are completely unacceptable to Christians—such as the denial of Christ's death or the insistence that the Bible is falsified. Muslims nevertheless have the right to develop and articulate their own doctrine. Christians enjoy that same right.

This is not to deny that the Church should seek to encourage friendly relations between Christians and Muslims. Indeed many recent papal statements are dedicated to just this thing. In a November 28, 2013 address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Pope Francis insists: "The Catholic Church is aware of the value of promoting friendship and respect among men and women of different religious traditions." It would be dangerous, however, if the Church were to say only things which Muslims agree with in the interest of promoting friendship, and D'Costa recognizes this danger: "The Catholic Church wants to build bridges and good relations, but not at the cost of forfeiting analytical rigour and fidelity to the truth" (209).

One might say that this danger is especially present when it comes to Islam, a religion that not only differs from Christianity but also explicitly challenges Christian teaching. Through the centuries, Muslims (inspired by both the Qur'an and the social reality of Muslim-Christian competition) developed a large library of anti-Christian polemic known in Arabic as *radd 'ala al-nasara*, and Muslims have long celebrated and promoted the conversion of Christians to Islam.

The interest of Muslims in converting Christians has reached a fever pitch in the modern period (in part as a response to Christian missions among Muslims). Today there are numerous organizations and innumerable websites dedicated to "*da'wa*," or the "call" to non-Muslims to convert to Islam. *Da'wa* missionaries, such as the South African Ahmed Deedat (1918–2005) or the Indian Zakir Naik (1965–), are public celebrities in the Islamic world and among Muslims in the West. Both Deedat and Naik, who was given the 2015 King Faisal Award for "service to Islam" by Saudi Arabia, are particularly concerned to refute Christianity and to invite Christians to embrace Islam. In fact, Muslim *da'wa* has often been successful.

The number of converts to Islam in the West (and in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere) continues to grow. Whereas conversions to Islam in most of the twentieth century in the United States were largely limited to African Americans (many of whom joined the heterodox Nation of Islam movement), more recently, white Americans and Latinos (many of a Catholic background) are also accepting Islam in larger numbers. The numbers of converts to Islam in Europe is also increasing. Some converts have embraced the most radical form of Sunni Islam and have gone to Syria or Iraq to join the holy war. The Church, while affirming freedom of religion (especially in light of *Dignitatis Humanae*), should not take this apostasy lightly.

In thinking about Islam, then, it is important for Catholic theologians both to recognize the piety and devotion of Muslims, which can indeed often serve as a model for Christians, and to have an answer ready for the challenging questions that Muslims ask about their hope in Christ. As D'Costa shows us in *Vatican II*, the Church calls on us at once to develop a sincere esteem for Muslims and Islam, and to be faithful to the Gospel. N&V